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How Vital is Nature? Animated Bodies and Agency in Contemporary Capitalism

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ABSTRACT This paper brings into conversation two ontologies that depart from the anthropocentric norm: new materialism, represented here by the US vitalist philosopher Jane Bennett, and the animated cosmology common among Indigenous peoples, as an example of which I take *Braiding Sweetgrass* by the Potawatomi bryologist Robin Wall Kimmerer. I provide exegeses of both philosophies, with respect in particular to the notion of "animation," noting that the animated sphere is much more extensive for Bennett than for Kimmerer. I then track Bennett's shift away from environmental ethics. Finally, I relate differences in philosophy to differences with regard to race and racism, with a detailed discussion of Bennett's tribute to Walt Whitman, and the genocidal elements within his democratic politics.

KEYWORDS Jane Bennett, capitalism, nature, networks, new materialism, vitalism

Which bodies are animated? And which have agency—the capacity to act independently and to exercise free choices? The broadest answer to the first is that all are in movement. Whether a maggot or a moon of Mars, all bodies exist in "an uninterrupted process of transformation."[1] But living beings are animated in a qualitatively richer sense than inert matter, and many of them possess "a freedom of self-movement." The degree to which this approximates free activity, of course, varies according to species. Humans stand out in their enjoyment of full "spiritual"

agency, i.e., agency that encompasses the ability to “question, challenge, and transform” our purposes.[2]

To some, this anthropocentric model appears troublingly hierarchical. After all, if there is one stand-out feature of the contemporary world order, neoliberal capitalism, it is the war on the other species with which humans share the planet, that humans have been pursuing through climate change and ocean acidification, pollution and plastics, livestock agriculture and other forms of habitat destruction. Many of Earth’s biogeochemical processes are, thanks to human interventions, deteriorating at breakneck speed and along multiple dimensions.[3] Against this backdrop it is scant wonder that concerned citizens seek to emphasize their solidarity with other species, or that some philosophers are questioning, challenging, and seeking to transform anthropocentric ideologies, as well as any that relegate “nature” to the status of resource or inventory.

At first sight one might assume that the critique of anthropocentric ontology and the affirmation of “animated nature” would align with environmental ethics, but that is not necessarily so. In this article I explore why that might be, by exegesis of two philosophical positions. One is the Indigenous cosmology of animation, as an example of which I take *Braiding Sweetgrass* by the Potawatomi bryologist Robin Wall Kimmerer. The other is the new materialism, represented here by the US vitalist philosopher Jane Bennett.

For Kimmerer and Bennett alike, the non-human cosmos teems with animated bodies. To explore them they take a personal approach that skips around prescribed scholarly boundaries. In Bennett’s case, her appreciation of the style of two of her guiding lights, Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman, applies equally to her own: it tends to “float between genres—part political theory, part mythmaking, part poetry, part speculative philosophy.”[4] For Kimmerer, the approach is encapsulated in her title, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Sweetgrass, “the hair of

Mother Earth," has traditionally been braided by Native American peoples to show their care and their appreciation of the gifts she brings. "Braiding" refers to the book's structure, woven from three strands: Indigenous and scientific worldviews and the author's life story.

In juxtaposing Indigenous and new-materialist philosophies, this essay explores the politics involved in extending principles of animation and agency to non-living bodies. Further, and with reference to Karl Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, it suggests that to fully appreciate the natural world requires a relational, dialectical understanding of humanity's position within it, entailing an awareness that human society not only exists within "animated" nature, but is actively undermining that animacy.

The Animated Universe of Jane Bennett

My account of Bennett's philosophy is distilled from her three most recent books: *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (2001)*, Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010)*,* and *Influx & Efflux: Writing Up with Walt Whitman* (2020). In them, she explores her fascination for "the phenomenon of animation—of dead things coming alive, of objects revealing a secret capacity for self-propulsion," and fashions philosophical tools for an "enchanted materialism."[5] A motivating factor is her objection to the instrumental view of nature as "an inert set of resources awaiting human deployment."[6] Against this, she pitches for an "experience of enchantment" whereby humans learn to stir their bodies together with the matter around them, recognising in it some of the agency that "we officially ascribe only to ourselves."[7] Alluding to the hermetic tradition of Paracelsus, she depicts the universe as pervaded by animist elements. But where Paracelsus perceives in this a life-giving spirit that ultimately is God, Bennett's enchanted materialism

construes the cosmos not as divinely conjured yet "lively and wondrous" nonetheless.[8]

This post-humanist ontology is developed further in *Vibrant Matter* (2010). Drawing on a lineage that includes Democritus, Baruch Spinoza, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Henri Bergson, Bennett paints a vitalist universe in which all is conative and agentive, with non-human objects understood as "bona fide participants." Their lack of purpose notwithstanding, non-living materials are "forces to be reckoned with." All things are "vital actants"—whether a woodlouse, a lump of lead, the corpse of Bruno Latour, or a gooseberry.

In *Influx & Efflux* (2020), we are treated to further discussion of the merging of human society into a "continuum of lively bodies and forces—a continuum that elides conventional dichotomies of life and matter, organic and inorganic, subjective and objective, agency and structure."[9] Agency is not located in humans but *distributed* across the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms, and in Whitman's poetry we find some choice illustrations. The affect and performance of "pluck" is one such. Bennett presents pluck as a democratic spirit, a stance critical to civic life, and one that in Whitman we find in the conjunction of an object—an axe—and the humans who created and wield it. Together, this assemblage forms "the collective agency of pluck." The miners and the metal ores and the axe itself are all active presences in the axe-wielder's life. Thus the axe, Bennett summarizes, "enables the pluck of men."[10]

Whitman, in Bennett's reading, is peculiarly alive to non-human agency because, for him, individual egos are not self-enclosed but porous to outside influences, "to the limber motion of brawny young arms, the shapely naked wan of the broad-axe, the sweat of armpits, [and] indeed, every atom."[11] Drawing on Francis Galton's interest in physique and Whitman's in phrenology, Bennett searches for aesthetic dispositions and performances of self-improvement and "moral health." In the "gravitational Sympathy" of "bodily postures" she seeks a democratic

stance that can resist the sorts of behavioural codes—those framed as ethics or as "societal ideals"—of which she is wary.[12]

Robin Wall Kimmerer: Nature Loves Us Back

At first sight, Kimmerer appears to sit within a similar landscape. She, too, is rebuking the Western concept of a Great Chain of Being with homo sapiens at the apex. "In Native ways of knowing," she writes, humans are regarded as having "the least experience with how to live and thus the most to learn—we must look to our teachers among the other species for guidance."[13] The objects and beings we encounter in nature should be viewed not as resources but more like elder relatives whom we respect and from whom we have much to learn. Kimmerer sees not only living beings—the archaea, bacteria, fungi, plants, animals, etc.—as animated, but also water, fire, and even the rocks and mountains, not least in their propensity to give gifts to one another and to humans. She contrasts "the language of animacy" that we find among infants and Indigenous peoples with the soulless materialism that prevails in capitalist, and especially settler-colonial, modernity.[14] For these regimes, the disenchantment of nature serves a purpose. Referring to living plants and animals as "it" turns them into natural resources, as if they are private property, as if the earth were not "a bowl of berries" but an open cast mine.[15]

The differences between Bennett and Kimmerer, however, are instructive. One that catches the eye is that, for Kimmerer, the animated sphere comprises the natural world along with some cultural artifacts (songs, drums, sacred medicines, and stories), but the majority of artificial objects are confined to the inanimate sphere. The market system is seen as particularly problematic as it drives the alienation of humans from their natural environment; it "grants personhood to corporations but denies it to the more-than-human beings."[16] For Bennett, by

contrast, *everything* is animated, and many human artefacts, such as nanotechnology and personal computers, are marvellously enchanted too. Enchantment "never really left the world," as eco-spiritualists suppose. It merely changed its shape.[17]

If one sentence encapsulates Kimmerer's approach it is her book's self-description as "a braid of stories meant to heal our relationship with the world."[18] The subject is "us," humanity, the predicate is our relationship with the world that we inhabit but which is being unbalanced by the market system, the social order that has come to govern us. Her work is guided by the need to restore well-being, "to make things whole."[19] Let us weep for the world that we are breaking apart, she writes, "so we can love it back to wholeness again."[20] Required is a culture of reciprocity. Each person, whether human or not, "is bound to every other in a reciprocal relationship . . . . If I receive a stream's gift of pure water, then I am responsible for returning a gift in kind." One of the "gifts" that mark humans out from the rest of the natural world is precisely our capacity for "gratitude," the sentiment on which cultures of reciprocity are built. "It's such a simple thing," she writes, "but we all know the power of gratitude to incite a cycle of reciprocity."[21]

There is, then, a relaxed dualism throughout *Braiding Sweetgrass*, in that it recognizes the distinctive agency, powers, reflexivity, and responsibilities of human society while also perceiving our rootedness in the natural realm. The humanity-nature connection is repeatedly referred to as a relationship, one that requires care and love—and for love to be reciprocated, such that humans and nature can flourish together, we have to recognize the animacy of the natural realm. As one of Kimmerer's students puts it, "You wouldn't harm what gives you love."[22] Nature loves us and will respond to our love, is the book's central message. This is, then, a richly relational perspective on the animation of nature, pivoting on a tragic sensibility—human society is destroying nature, sapping its animacy—and a faith that love of nature is indispensable for greater tragedies to be averted and for humankind to come to love its own.

New Materialism vs. Environmental Ethics

In Bennett, by contrast, the human-nature dualism is anything but relaxed. It is of course present. The fact that humanity is degrading nature as a result of the alienated social system(s) that we have constructed creeps onto the pages. But any such glimpses are awkward. They are repeatedly repressed by her conceptual framework, a flat ontology that dissolves homo sapiens into the writhing cosmos. As an example, consider food consumption. Eating, for Bennett, is not a subject-object relation, but an encounter between actors—human and foodstuff—each of which transforms the other. What this effaces is that one actor eats, the other is eaten. It seems, the cultural theorist Simon Schleusener remarks, that from her espousal of an anti-hierarchical ontology, actual hierarchies "that are informed by a strikingly asymmetric distribution of power—as, for instance, the relations between humans and animals—are rendered quasi non-existent."[23]

The framework may appear radical in its species humility, yet the price paid is the relinquishing of the footholds of social critique—it is unable to grasp that humanity, having emerged within the natural world, has come to dominate and destroy it. Equipped with the new materialism, then, we are freed from environmental ethics. If humans are simply one entity among squillions, just doing our thing like the woodlice, the gooseberries, or the lump of lead, why should we seek to tread lightly on the earth?

Bennett recognizes that her ontology sits uncomfortably with environmental ethics. In 2001, when she asked herself "what is the content of my ethic of enchanted materialism?," the answer was a "hyperecological sense of interdependence" that proceeds from "the principle of treading lightly on the earth."[24] In her next book, in 2010, she comes to see that it does not in fact proceed from any environmental or ecological principle (with or without the

"hyper" prefix). Here, she reports, "as I shift from environmentalism to vital materialism, to a heterogeneous monism of vibrant bodies, I find the ground beneath my old ethical maxim, 'tread lightly on the earth,' to be less solid."[25] According to this maxim, the "earth-affirming norm" of frugality, "I should try to minimize the impact of my actions so as to minimize the damage or destruction of other things with which I share existence."[26] Between her 2001 and 2010 books, Bennett switched from living life "as a human subject," to existing as a vital materialist. She now self-identifies as one among a multitude of "conative actants swarming and competing with each other." Whereas an environmentalist is a self who lives on earth, she writes, "vital materialists are selves who live *as* earth, who are more alert to the capacities and limitations—the 'jizz'—of the various materials that they are."[27] Having adopted this new identity, Bennett came to feel that "frugality is too simple a maxim."[28] When one gives up subjecthood to become an element within a cloud of actants, each swarming and competing, no understanding of power relations need enter into one's account of the world, and little moral accountability either—still less, one that construes humanity as a structured ensemble that is causing fearful harm to our natural environment and needs to be won to a different sense of responsibility and/or a different social system. Instead, one's "ethical responsibility now resides in one's response to the assemblages in which one finds oneself participating."[29] The remaining options are to extricate oneself "from assemblages whose trajectory is likely to do harm," or, conversely, to enter "into the proximity of assemblages whose conglomerate effectivity tends toward the enactment of nobler ends."[30] It is a stance that, as others have noted, is attuned to the prevailing ethic of contemporary capitalism—a "neoliberal mindset" that conceives of politics in almost entirely voluntaristic terms.[31]

Bennett's world, in which human agency is radically de-emphasized, is also, notes Andreas Malm, one that tends to exclude moral responsibility.[32] His observation comes in a commentary on Bennett's study of a blackout in North America, in which she exonerates the politicians and energy corporations who maintain

responsibility for the grid. What was, then, the cause? “Though it would give me great pleasure to assert that deregulation and corporate greed are the real culprits,” she instead takes great pleasure in asserting that the real culprit was the fact that an electricity grid is an “assemblage composed of intersecting and resonating elements.”[33] As such, friction among the elements and, therefore, ultimately, grid collapse, becomes possible. The power cut, in short, was the grid itself “speaking.” For the grid is best perceived as a congeries of actants that may have included deregulation but also “overprotective” powerplant mechanisms, “the unstable power of electron flows,” “conative wildfires,” and “the wires of transmission lines which tolerate only so much heat before they refuse to transmit the electron flow.”[34] The grid, through the new-materialist looking glass, is not an energy system that humans have produced in capitalist conditions but, rather, “a volatile mix of coal, sweat, electromagnetic fields, computer programs, electron streams, profit motives, heat, lifestyles, nuclear fuel, plastic, fantasies of mastery, static, legislation, water, economic theory, wire, and wood”—to name just a few of its constituent parts.[35] To describe it in this way, to highlight the roles performed by non-human actants in the course of events, helps us move away from the “blame game,” argues Bennett. It is a method that can profitably be extended to any disaster one chooses. Take, say, the Grenfell Tower fire: occasioned by an assemblage of actants that included oxygen, such a boisterous wee molecule when it rubs up against hot plastic cladding, a quirky meander in the jet stream that spared London heavy rain on June 14, 2017, the unruly wiring of a fridge and the momentary daydream of a worker involved in its manufacture, the fire doors that, in their vibrant recalcitrance, elected not to close properly on that day, and so on. Such an explanation effaces the neoliberal actors and the capitalist and colonial forces that were meaningfully responsible for the disaster.[36]

Quirky and Dialectical Materialisms

Bennett traces her new materialism to an ancient lineage of Democritus and Epicurus, which she contrasts to that of "Hegel-Marx-Adorno."[37] From Democritus comes the image of the cosmos composed of wiggling atoms and from Epicurus the "appreciation of agency within nature."[38] Epicurus developed an "enchantment-friendly materialism,"[39] quarky and quirky, and one can hear Epicurean tones, too, in Bennett's account of freedom's rootedness in the contingencies of the material world,[40] and perhaps too in its hedonistic quest for "sensuous enchantment with the everyday world—with nature but also with commodities."[41] In her critique of Marx, Bennett foregrounds the question of enchantment. For all his partiality to Epicurus, she believes, Marx failed to learn enchanted materialism. His materialism is inert and fixated on "economic structures and exchanges."[42] Nature, in Marx's "onto-story," is "dis-enchanted," for he holds agency to be "concentrated in humans."[43]

To read Marx's materialism as restricted to economic structures or as nature-disenchanting in the manner Bennett suggests, is, frankly, obtuse. Marx does not draw a hard and fast line between humans and other organisms. He repeatedly speaks of the dialectical relationality of the natural order, and of the metabolism of humans and their environment. In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, for example, the sun is described as "the object of the plant—an indispensable object to it, confirming its life—just as the plant is an object of the sun, being an expression of the life-awakening power of the sun. A being which does not have its nature outside itself is not a natural being, and plays no part in the system of nature."[44] Humans, similarly, are conceived of in relation to "external" nature. Marx describes "plants, animals, stones, air, light, etc." as "a part of human life and human activity." Nature "is man's inorganic body—nature, that is, insofar as it is not itself human body. Man lives on nature—nature is his body, with which he must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die."[45]

On this question, Judith Butler's reading of the *Manuscripts of 1844* is illuminating. She draws attention to the ways in which Marx depicts living bodies as "animated, brought to life" by the external world, which they reciprocally animate.[46] For humans, the powers of their animation lie "outside of the human subject," their relationship with nature involves "interchange (not exchange), and animation; it establishes the body of nature as essential to the body of man."[47] The vision, in short, is of "human creatures, dependent on nature, as well as on the activity by which nature becomes support and sustenance for living beings."[48] It is on the basis of this understanding of the society-nature metabolism that Marx develops his understanding of its alienated character in class-divided societies. Thus, in the *Manuscripts of 1844*, he describes how the feudal appropriation of nature turns land into "an alien power," an alienation that then becomes ratcheted up under capitalism. "The relation of the worker to the product of labour as an alien object exercising power over him," as he puts it, is "at the same time the relation to the sensuous external world, to the objects of nature, as an alien world inimically opposed to him."[49] The alienation of labor bears most forcefully on workers themselves but is the mechanism of universal estrangement: of "man" from "his own body, as well as external nature and his spiritual aspect, his human aspect, his life activity," and thereby from the potential to unfold his species capacities in freedom.[50] It is, equally, a diagnosis of the disruption of the humanity-nature metabolism and the depredations of the natural world under capitalist conditions. With abhorrence, Marx observed the application of industrial methods to livestock agriculture and, quoting Thomas Müntzer, lamented the conversion of "all creatures—the fishes in the water, the birds in the air, the plants on the earth" into property.[51] Humanity had become "the most active exterminator" of other species and was undermining the habitability of the planet.[52]

Fetishism and the Animation of Commodities

In the 1844 Manuscripts, Marx writes of “the devaluation of the world of men” that follows from “the increasing value of the world of things,”[53] a framework that he developed in *Capital* with the theory of commodity fetishism—the mystified form taken by economic domination in capitalism, whereby social relations take the “fantastic form” of relations between things. Bennett, following from her critique of Marx’s disenchanted materialism, reads this as a manifestation of Enlightenment racism: Marx constructs a contrast between the modern world of enlightenment and critical philosophy and the primitive realms of “the negro [and] pagan animism,” which he lumps together with the “commodity culture” that is the main target of his critique.[54] In her alternative ontology, commodities are in substance “vibrant,” ergo Marx is wrong to theorize them as gaining a (perverse) animation through the construction of the market system. Consequently, whereas commodity fetishism for Marx plays a core role in capitalism’s self-justification, with resistance to capitalism found in zones of life that contradict the power of capital (class struggle, etc.), Bennett proposes instead that we “exploit the positive ethical potential secreted within” capitalist processes.[55]

In Bennett’s reading, Marx is reproducing the European denigration of fetishism found among “primitive” peoples. This is not a plausible reading; he is doing the very opposite. The concept, of course, arose within a racist discourse in which European travellers and economists portrayed themselves as modern and rational, with a civilized commercial economy, in contrast to the primitive and superstitious “Other.” Yet Marx’s adaptation of the term is precisely a détournement of this discourse. For him, the European commercial economy is itself profoundly fetishistic. As David McNally observes, Marx “turned the charge of fetish-worship back on the European ruling class, declaring that it was they

who bowed down before objects. Rather than the rationalists they proclaim themselves to be, urged Marx, Europe's rulers in fact idolise things."[56]

Sweetgrass and Stinking Sumac

With "race" in mind, let us return to Kimmerer. A plant of dearest interest to her is sweetgrass. In parts of North America it is embattled. In one field she observes foreign plants such as quackgrass, clover, and daisies encroaching, as well as "a wave of invasive purple loosestrife."[57] Loosestrife in particular exhibits "the colonizing habit of taking over others' homes and growing without regard to limits."[58] To restore the sweetgrass, she proposes in a resonant metaphor, "we'll need to loosen the hold of the colonists, opening a way for the return of the natives."[59]

Bennett, in contrast, speaks of her self-identification with *ailanthus altissima*, or stinking sumac, which "is considered around here to be an invasive weed."[60] Ailanthus "aggressively inhibits (and can even kill) native plants near it." An invasive plant, it:

crowds out native species with its dense thickets and secretes a chemical into the soil that is toxic to surrounding plants. When native plants are hindered or killed, it upsets the balance of the native ecosystem and biodiversity, potentially leading to extinctions of native plant and animal species across the whole ecosystem.[61]

Stinking sumac achieved literary fame in Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. By coincidence it is in her book on another denizen of Brooklyn, Walt Whitman (who happens to be a near exact contemporary of Marx), that Bennett discusses it.[62] Her affinity with alianthus is aesthetic, in tune with the new-materialist ontology: "I too, along with Ailanthus, am leaning and longing, casting and connecting, radiating and being radiated."[63]

Whitman, too, was longing and radiating, an expansive character, a vitalist philosopher, and passionately democratic. But if democracy is often born in violence, in settler-colonial conditions it is steeped in the blood of Indigenous inhabitants.[64] It is puzzling that Bennett's book-length ode to Whitman fails to notice any of this, not even that the axes she extols as actants of democratic "pluck" were simultaneously tools of mass murder. Whitman's "Pioneers! O Pioneers!"—published in the 1860s, a decade of bloody massacres of Native Americans—begins with the call to the westward-marching génocidaires to "get your weapons ready; Have you your pistols? have you your sharp-edged axes?" It continues: "We, the youthful sinewy races, all the rest on us depend . . . O you youths, western youths, full of manly pride . . . . Swift! to the head of the army!—Swift! spring to your places, Pioneers! O pioneers."[65]

I am not suggesting that Whitman's racist and genocidal tendencies eclipse the illuminating elements that Bennett finds in his verse. Nonetheless, his dark side is no recent revelation; its lack of acknowledgment in *Influx & Efflux* is puzzling. As early as 1955, Leadie Clark charged that "Whitman might be construed as advocating genocide in the United States," and that he portrayed "the Indian" as "the man who must vanish."[66] Bennett, Lisa Gilson points out, makes a cursory case that Whitman tacitly critiques racism but neglects to consider his "less savoury statements."[67] These would have revealed his "indifference" to Native Americans, in the words of one of their number, Maurice Kenny, and his obliviousness to their "death cries."[68] In his more generous moods, Whitman did imagine Native Americans as "noble savages"—but this was also why his encounters with the real ones, whom he met when employed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, were generally disappointing. With Social-Darwinist sighing, he contemplates their fate, unfortunate roadkill on the highway to Manifest Destiny. Their race was perishing in the Darwinian manner, naturally succumbing to his "superber" race.[69] The pistols and axes were mere accompaniments, not the cause. And along with "the I***n," the "n****r" would also be eliminated, Whitman confided to his biographer Horace Traubel.[70] This, too, he contemplated without

regret, considering Black people as “baboons” and “wild brutes” whose inclusion in the US body politic discomfited him.[71] Following the Civil War he even advocated forgiveness for the former slavers and Southern whites.

That Bennett fails to address this is striking, but one might respond that it is tangential to her argument. That would be a mistake, for two reasons. One is that Whitman’s genocidal streak is bound up with his exultation in the taming and clearing of wild nature, which Bennett likewise neglects to consider. In “Pioneers! O Pioneers!,” the heroes are celebrated in their labors of modernization: “We primeval forests felling, We the rivers stemming, and piercing deep the mines within; We the surface broad surveying, we the virgin soil upheaving.”[72] In “Song of the Broad-Axe,” the eponymous tool is celebrated as it razes the forests to make room for the “settlements of the Arkansas, Colorado, Ottawa, Willamette,” the factories and railroads, the “Capitols of States,” and so on.[73]

The other is that the Whitman she adores is rooted in the Whitman she ignores. His depiction of the cosmos bursting with vital expansive energies is also his depiction of Walt Whitman bursting with vital expansive energies is also his depiction of his nation and race bursting with vital expansive energies. In a perceptive essay, Benjamin Meiners traces the connections between Whitman’s subjectivity and the settler-colonial context. The poet, in developing his unique approach to the universe, appropriated “tropes associated with indigenous peoples, announcing himself as ‘Fresh, free, savage.’”[74] It is precisely through these tropes that he imagines “an unencumbered ‘I’: free from the state and free from normative, hierarchized modes of belonging”—the fluid ego that excites Bennett. But that unencumbered self, Meiners goes on, “depends upon the expansiveness of land.”[75] The performative erotics of Whitman’s “I,” being “expansive, limitless, ever-fluid,” stem from “the logics of settler colonialism.”[76] If Whitman readers applaud the radicalism of his politics while occluding its relation to “a national/personal expansionist vision,” Meiners concludes, they “run the risk of naturalizing settler colonialism.”[77]

Windigo Economics: Alienated Power in Animated Forms

Cosmologies of universal animation take many shapes; they articulate to any number of political visions. Even some of the architects-in-chief of mechanical natural philosophy (and hence of "disenchantment")—Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton, Robert Boyle, William Petty, and the Hartlib Circle—maintained attachments to the "enchanted" cosmos, notably Paracelsean Hermeticism with its mystical vision of life and sentience secreted throughout all matter and criss-crossed by "secret ties of sympathy and antipathy."[78] These same gentlemen were zealots of England's bourgeois revolution in its most utilitarian, violent, and settler-colonial forms. That revolution was pivotal to the consolidation of capitalism, which, in turn, proceeded to replace a biodiverse planet with the sixth mass extinction, and the benign Holocene with the perilous Capitalocene. To all this, the dominant response has been to fiddle while the planet burns, justified by fatalism, hedonism, mysticism, and nihilism, as well as denial of the systemic role of capitalism.

The new materialists, in extending agency, risk justifying the fiddling. In dissolving responsibility into the writhing cosmos they exculpate capitalism from the environmental and social violence for which it ought to be held responsible. Their celebration of all bodies, of all matter as "vibrant" cannot get to grips with the axe, or the other tools of environmental destruction, for these are ingrained in the world of matter that they celebrate.[79] Their contribution, Kate Soper observes, is to obfuscate the critical differences between humans and other animals in "creating and (potentially) in resolving ecological crisis."[80] It is *human modes of production* that, in their stark distinction from the cyclical modes of existence of other creatures, "are wrecking the planet, and humans alone who can do something about it."[81] What requires urgent attention are not so much the traits

we share with other species as the peculiar rapaciousness of our social order and the question of how to overcome it.

None of this however should be taken to imply that philosophies that envision non-living bodies, the non-living cosmos as animated, vital, enchanted, etc., are incapable of grasping the peculiar rapacity of the capitalist system. Far from it, and *Braiding Sweetgrass* is a case in point. Whereas a new materialist would approach, say, a stone in essentially abstract terms through the lens of their contemplative ego, Kimmerer's starting point is her community and its relationship to the land. Her favoured pronoun is "we." The stone, for her, is relationally situated: it belongs to the environment to which her communities (her tribe, and current neighbourhood(s), and humanity as a whole) belong, and she to them. This viewpoint is characteristic of Indigenous philosophies worldwide.[82] Unlike in the English language, in which "environment" derives from an Old French term for "enclose," expressing the externalization of nature, Indigenous languages generally lack such a term, reflecting a view of humans as inseparable from plants, animals, and geomorphology.[83] The viewpoint posits the environment as sacred, approaching the cosmos relationally and with an axiology/ethics centred on mutual obligation, reciprocity and accountability—to the land, to other people. It is rooted in community and environment, unlike the "settler mind" which apprehends land as property, as resources. On this basis, it figures capitalism and colonialism as systems that disrupt and disfigure the reciprocal relationships of nature and community. "A world made of gifts," says Kimmerer, "cannot coexist with a world made of commodities."[84] The latter "destroys the beloved earth to line the pockets of the greedy." Our finite planet cannot withstand its trajectory of "infinite growth."[85]

To capture the perversity of capitalist society, Marx turned to the gothic. Its visions of supernatural powers, morbid symptoms, disorientation and the uncanny, of inanimate objects taking on a terrifying vitality, provided tools with which to skewer the prevailing mythologies of progress and prosperity.[86] It was in

the literature of gothic horror, with its inanimate objects coming to life and running amok, that he found the vocabulary with which to depict “the mystifications of capitalist social relations where the phantasms of the bourgeois market return to haunt their creators.”[87] Kimmerer does something similar. To capture the dialectical image of human and natural potential being appropriated by forces of exploitation and oppression, of “fabricated demand and compulsive overconsumption,” of an economic system driving to infinite growth incompatible with the “finite planet,” she coins the term “Windigo economics.”[88] This refers to the mythical beast that once connoted the menace of barren winters but has since been reinterpreted by Native peoples to warn of the dangers of greed and selfishness, of capitalism and colonialism. “We have unleashed a monster. The very earth that sustains us is being destroyed to fuel injustice. An economy that grants personhood to corporations but denies it to the more-than-human beings: this is a Windigo economy.”[89]

Notes

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